



## Study of The Mauryan Empire, and causes of its Decline : A Review

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**Abstract :** The History of India begins with the Indus Valley Civilization and the coming of the Aryans. These two phases are generally described as the pre-Vedic and Vedic periods. The earliest literary source that sheds light on India's past is the Rig Veda. It is difficult to date this work with any accuracy on the basis of tradition

ISSN : 2348-5612 © URR



and ambiguous astronomical information contained in the hymns. It is most likely that Rig Veda was composed between 1,500 B.C. and 1,000 B.C. In the fifth century, large parts of India were united under Ashoka.

The 6th Century B.C. was a period of great tumult in India. The kingdom of Magadha, one of the 16 great Janapadas had become paramount over other kingdoms of the Ganges Valley. This period also saw the emergence of various heterodox sects in India. This was the time when Buddhism and Jainism emerged as popular protestant movements to pose a serious challenge to Brahmanic orthodoxy.

**Key Words :** History of India, Ashoka, Budh, Maurya, Chandragupt

**Introduction :** This period was followed by the Mauryas of whom the most famous was Ashoka the Great. The boundaries of his empire extended from Kashmir and Peshawar in the North and Northwest to Mysore in the South and Orissa in the East - but his fame rests not so much on military conquests as on his celebrated renunciation of war.

### The Mauryan Empire

Prior to the rise of the Maurya, numerous states, large and small, covered northern India. This was the classical age of the history of ancient India, a time of religious ferment when two new faiths, Buddhism and Jainism, appeared.



One of the largest of these states was Magadha. It was located in the eastern part of the Ganges plain, on the periphery of the Aryan cultural area. At this stage in Indian history other states apparently regarded Magadha as semi-barbarous. Perhaps its position on the frontiers of the Aryan world meant that its people were not too strict in their commitment to the old Vedic religion of northern India. It is certainly the case that the two non-orthodox faiths of Jainism and Buddhism flourished here in their early days, and found patrons amongst the Magadha kings.

Gradually, over a century or more, Magadha extended its borders. Then, under a line of kings of the Nanda dynasty (reigned c. 424-322 BCE), the kingdom dramatically expanded, to cover a large part of northern India.

### **Chandragupta**

The Mauryan period of ancient Indian history was really inaugurated by the conquest of northwest India by Alexander the Great, in 326 BCE. This seems to have destabilized the political situation amongst the Aryan states in the region, allowing the first great conqueror in Indian history, Chandragupta Maurya (reigned 322-298 BCE), to rise to power.

Chandragupta seized control of the throne of Maghadha from the last Nanda king, and then proceeded to conquer that part of northern India which still remained outside Magadha's borders. He drove out the Seleucids, Alexander's successors, from the Indian subcontinent, and went on to conquer the easternmost provinces of Alexander's former empire, reaching into Afghanistan and eastern Iran.

Internally, building on foundations laid by the Nanda kings, his reign saw the establishment of a strong central government. This was the work of his highly capable chief minister, Chanakya.

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son, Bindusara (reigned 298-272 BCE). He continued his father's conquests by extending Mauryan power down into central India.



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## **Ashoka**

Bindusara was followed by his son, Ashoka (also spelt Asoka – reigned 272-232 BCE). Asoka proved to be one of the most remarkable, and attractive, rulers in the history of India, and indeed the whole of world history.

After a bloody war against Kalinga, in eastern India, Ashoka renounced warfare and converted to Buddhism. He determined that henceforward he would reign in peace.

He actively promoted the spread of Buddhism; and sent missions abroad, to Sri Lanka (headed by his son, Mahinda) and South East Asia. Here they laid the foundations for Buddhism's later triumph as the predominant faith. He also sent missions to the Greek-speaking kingdoms to the west, which had carved up Alexander the Great's conquests between them. Here they seem to have made little impact.

We can still see the pillars Ashoka erected around his empire, on which were inscribed royal edicts and encouragements to his subjects to live in harmony with one another. These edicts and exhortations give an insight into Ashoka's mind. What comes across is a compassionate, tolerant but firm ruler, seeking justice and well-being for all his subjects.

## **Decline of The Mauryan Empire**

Fifty years or so after Ashoka's death, perhaps sooner (there is very little evidence from the later Maurya period), the huge empire began to crumble. Outlying provinces fell away, and by the mid-2nd century BCE the empire had shrunk to its core areas.

Ashoka has sometimes been blamed for sowing the seeds of decline by his too-gentle rule. He might have left unchecked destabilizing forces, which came to full power after he was gone.

For this idea there is no evidence; indeed the edicts scattered around the empire suggest a firm and vigorous ruler. The causes of decline probably lie elsewhere, and can be summarized as follows:

### **Causes of decline**

First, Ashoka seems to have been followed by a succession of weak rulers, who could not exert their will over such a large empire.



This is related to the second reason, the Maurya's failure to develop robust imperial institutions. Unlike the Han empire in China, which continued to run smoothly for almost 400 years, even when the emperors were nonentities, the effectiveness of Mauryan rule was always directly dependent upon the personal ability and energy of the king.

Later experience from around the world – for example, from China and the Roman empire – shows that, unless there is a well-working system for selecting and promoting capable and comparatively honest officials, a bureaucracy can soon become fragmented amongst the followers of over-powerful ministers and provincial governors. Something like this may well have occurred in late Maurya times, culminating in the breaking-away of large provinces from the empire.

**Conclusion :** Finally, the fragmentation of the Mauryan empire was, to some extent, a product of its very success. During the peace and unity the Mauryan kings had brought ancient India, Aryan culture had spread throughout much of the sub-continent. Towns and cities had sprung up – normally as centres of Mauryan administration – in places distant from the old seats of civilization. Economic development had come to areas which were previously the abode of forest peoples, of nomads and hunter-gatherers. All this had put in place the economic and administrative foundations upon which new, independent states could be built; and, with the firm hand of the early Mauryan kings gone, such states soon appeared.

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